

Boney James bio — *A Simple Man*

Three decades into a career built on deep groove, melodic instinct and a saxophone voice unmistakably his own, Boney James is still finding new ground. On *A Simple Man*, his milestone 20th studio album, out October 2 via Concord Records, the multi-platinum saxophonist, composer and producer turns inward without narrowing his musical world. The result is one of his most personal records: R&B feeling remains at its center, jazz tradition is honored, and James sounds every bit like a musician still striving for new possibilities on his instrument.

That forward motion is all the more striking given the scale of what James has already accomplished. His catalog has generated more than two billion on-demand streams in the United States and sales of four million U.S. album equivalents. His honors include four GRAMMY nominations, three NAACP Image Award nominations, four RIAA Gold-certified records, a Soul Train Award and a BET Award nomination. *Billboard* named him one of the Top 3 Contemporary Jazz Artists of the 2000s, and in 2024 he became the first artist to score 20 No. 1 singles on the *Billboard* Smooth Jazz chart. Recent vocal collaborations have also earned him two Top 10 hits at Adult R&B.

For James, however, *A Simple Man* is less about taking stock of those achievements than about stripping away what no longer feels essential.

“As I’ve gotten older, I’ve realized I don’t need a lot to make me happy,” says James. “I love making music and playing my saxophone. I strive to focus on the simple and positive things around me and filter out the noise.”

James approaches the saxophone as a singer approaches a lyric, shaping melodies around breath, tone and feeling rather than virtuosity for its own sake. His formative listening included Stevie Wonder, Earth, Wind & Fire, Curtis Mayfield and Marvin Gaye alongside the jazz music he studied as a young saxophonist. That sensibility has allowed him to move naturally between instrumental music and collaborations with some of the most distinctive vocalists of several generations.

On *A Simple Man*, that connection comes into particularly sharp focus on “I Belong To You,” a warm, contemporary R&B duet with GRAMMY-winning singer Ledisi. Co-written by James and Ledisi with BeatsMadeByFresh and Rex Rideout, the song reunites the pair more than two decades after they first appeared together on the Luther Vandross tribute album *Forever, For Always, For Luther*.

The rest of *A Simple Man* reveals how expansive James’ creativity can be.

The lyrical opener “Dreams” features a rare performances on flute, while “Morocco” reconnects him with acclaimed trumpeter Marquis Hill for a layered meeting of live instrumentation and electronic texture. “The Midnight Sun” grew from a spontaneous soundcheck jam James captured on his phone before rebuilding it in the studio, and “The Wire” draws on the atmosphere of 1970s soul soundtracks.

Legendary guitarist Larry Carlton joins James on the Steely Dan-influenced “Storybook,” while Duke Ellington’s “In a Sentimental Mood” becomes one of the album’s clearest statements of purpose. Rather than approaching the standard as a period piece, James places the melody

over a supple, D'Angelo-inspired groove, seamlessly bridging jazz history and contemporary R&B language. The hopeful "Things Are Looking Up," introspective title track and nature-minded closer "Birdsong" complete the record.

James produced *A Simple Man* himself, continuing an approach he has refined for more than two decades. He thinks of production as another instrument, gradually taking greater control of his records until becoming their principal architect from composition through final production. That autonomy has given him room to explore while preserving the melodic directness at the center of his sound.

Born in Lowell, Massachusetts and raised in New Rochelle, New York, James grew up surrounded by records ranging from jazz and classical music to musicals and film scores. He began on clarinet before being steered toward saxophone in fifth grade. When his family moved to Los Angeles during his teens, music became a lifeline as he adjusted to a new city and a new life.

By 19, James had turned professional. His formative years were spent on the road, touring on keys and sax with Morris Day, The Isley Brothers, Teena Marie, Randy Crawford, Ray Parker Jr., Sheena Easton, Bobby Caldwell and many others.

Between tours, James made demos and developed a musical identity of his own. His independently released 1992 debut, *Trust*, led to a major-label deal and launched a solo career that has steadily expanded the possibilities for contemporary instrumental music. Over the decades that followed, artists including George Benson, Al Jarreau, George Duke, Bilal, Lalah Hathaway, Raheem DeVaughn, Kenny Lattimore and October London have made guest appearances on his records. Those collaborations reflect the breadth of a musical identity that has always lived comfortably between jazz musicianship and the emotional directness of R&B.

He still practices, still experiments and still hears things in his playing that he could not do before. Rather than treating 20 albums as a destination, James sees the work in simpler terms: there is always another way to listen, another way to shape a note, another place the music might lead.

He is, as he puts it, still making progress.

And that may be the clearest expression of *A Simple Man*: an artist who after more than three decades, knows more clearly than ever what matters.